Wisdom of the Figurative Expressions used in the Holy Qur'an

A Speech by:

Dr. Saleem Rahman

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Literal Expressions and Figures of Speech

- Literal expressions denote what they mean, in the common usage or dictionary sense.

- Figurative expressions connote additional *layers of meaning*.

- Purpose of using Figurative Language:
  - To evoke an emotional response in the audience
  - To get them to pay attention

Benefits and **Risks** of Using Figurative Language

- Benefits of using figurative language. It makes the presentation of those topics:
  - **beautiful,**
  - **attractive,** and
  - **persuasive**
- Scriptures, too, use figurative language

- Potential risks of figurative usage:
  - Common people may take it literally and be misguided
  - "Literalists" may cause harm to the belief system by suppressing figurative meaning; taking things literally

An Example from the **Old Testament**

"Law of the Plague of Leprosy in a Garment": **Leviticus (13: 47-59).** (Source: http://bible.cc/leviticus/13-59.htm)

- **47.** The garment also that the plague of leprosy is in, whether it be a woolen garment, or a linen garment; **48**. Whether it be in the warp, or woof; of linen, or of woolen; whether in a skin, or in any thing made of skin; **49**. And if the plague be greenish or reddish in the garment, or in the skin, either in the warp, or in the woof, or in any thing of skin; it is a plague of leprosy, and shall be showed unto the priest: **50.** And the priest shall look upon the plague, and shut up it that hath the plague seven days: … 58 And the garment, either warp, or woof, or whatsoever thing of skin it be, which thou shalt wash, if the plague be departed from them, then it shall be washed the second time, and shall be clean. 59 This is the law of the plague of leprosy in a garment of woolen or linen, either in the warp, or woof, or any thing of skins, to pronounce it clean, or to pronounce it unclean.

An Example from the **Old Testament** ***cont'd*:**

- **Leviticus (13:47-59) New International Version (NIV);** http://www.biblegateway.com **;** © 1984 International Bible Society

Regulations about Mildew

- **47** "If any clothing is contaminated with mildew—any woolen or linen clothing, **48** any woven or knitted material of linen or wool, any leather or anything made of leather- **49** and if the contamination in the clothing, or leather, or woven or knitted material, or any leather article, is greenish or reddish, it is a spreading mildew and must be shown to the priest. **50** The priest is to examine the mildew and isolate the affected article for seven days. **…** **58** The clothing, or the woven or knitted material, or any leather article that has been washed and is rid of the mildew, must be washed again, and it will be clean." **59** These are the regulations concerning contamination by mildew in woolen or linen clothing, woven or knitted material, or any leather article, for pronouncing them clean or unclean.

Clarification from the Ancient Jewish Sources:

Biblical “leprosy” (or, *Tzaraath*) is not modern leprosy

- **“Tzaraath** (*tzaraas,…*) is an affliction mentioned in the Tanakh and other Jewish sources, starting in Leviticus 13-Leviticus 14. Although the term is commonly translated as leprosy, the reported symptoms of *tzaraath* are not entirely consistent with leprosy.”

- “[A]lthough it is presumed to be a medical condition, these [Biblical] texts characterize it as a spiritual affliction with a supernatural cause.”
- (*Source*: Wikipedia: http: // en. wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzaraath
)

Seven Causes of *Tzaraath* (in Leviticus 13) **according to Talmud**

- "According to **Jewish theological tradition**, *Tzaraath* was often believed to have come not through natural means but as a punishment for sin, and to have been cured not through natural means but through repentance and forgiveness."

- "The **Talmud** (Babylonian Talmud Arachin 16a) lists seven causes for *tzaraath*:

1. Speaking negatively of others (*lashon hara*)
2. Murder
3. A vain oath
4. Illicit sexual intercourse
5. Pride
6. Theft
7. Stinginess"

"Son of God": An Example from the **New Testament**

- "In the Graeco-Roman world heroes, rulers, and philosophers were called sons of God. In the Old Testament 'son of God' is used of angels or heavenly beings (e.g. Gen. 6:2,4; Deut. 32:5; Job 1:6-12), Israel or Israelites (e.g. Exod. 4:22; Hosea 11:1) and also of the king (notably in 2 Sam. 7:14 and Pslam 2:7). ...

"Son of God": An Example from the **New Testament**

cont'd ...

- "In view of this wide usage in Judaism and in the Graeco-Roman world, it is not surprising that 'son of God' became one of the most important ways Christians spoke about the significance of Jesus. ... Mark places particular emphasis on Jesus as the Son of God. Did Jesus refer to himself in this way? Or is this a confessional statement that arose in post-Easter church? ...
- "... Most scholars agree that the Aramaic or Hebrew word behind 'son' is 'servant'."

(*Source*: Graham N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, Oxford University Press, 1992.)

"Son of God": An Example from the **New Testament**

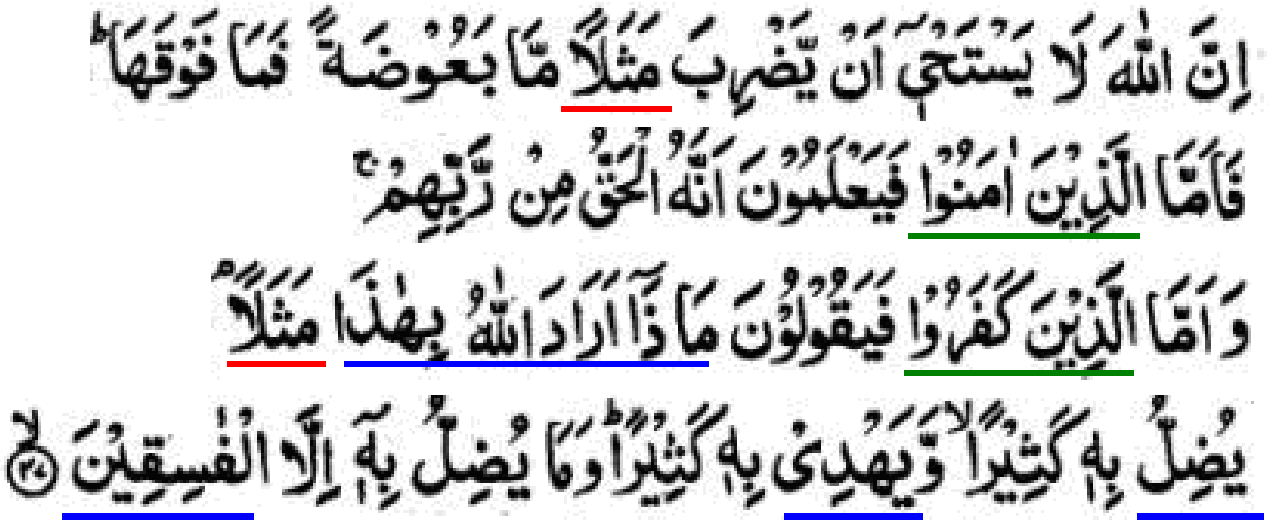
cont'd ...

- "... the expression "son of," as borrowed from Hebrew, can be used to mean something like "the soul of", or "the living embodiment of". A clear example of this last usage is John 17:12, where Jesus says he has not lost any of the disciples God gave him "except for the son of perdition," meaning "except for Mr. Perdition himself." Likewise, the Roman captain who exclaims in Luke 23:47, "Truly he was an innocent man," and in Matthew 27:54, "Truly he was **the son of God**," may have meant the same thing by either account: "Truly he was **the soul of godliness**."

  (Source: Andy Gus, *The Unvarnished Gospels: Translated from the original Greek*, Threshold Books (1988).

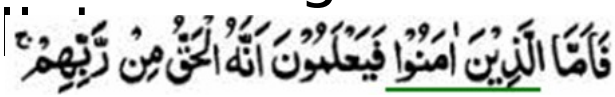
The Holy Qur’an:
Some Examples of the use of Parables, Similes, and Metaphors

When Allah, the Exalted, uses Figurative Language ... (2:27)



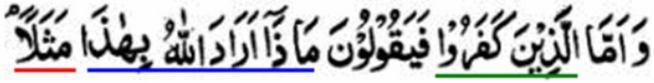
When Allah, the Exalted, uses Figurative Language ... (2:27)

- True believers recognize the metaphorical words used by Allah.



- Instead of focusing literally on the words, they try to reach the depth of meaning those figurative words convey. This helps the true believers achieve further spiritual heights, whereas ...

- The disbelievers remain focused on the literal meaning of those words and they question the very example used by Allah.



- As a result, they only degenerate further, down the path of misguidance.

The Metaphor of "Mountain":
A General Invitation to Ponder Over the Implied Meaning of Figures of Speech

لَوْ أَنزَلْنَا هَٰذَا الْقُرْآنَ عَلَىٰ جَبَلٍ لَّرَأَيْتَهُ خَاشِعًا مُّتَصَدِّعًا مِّنْ خَشْيَةِ اللَّهِ ۚ
وَتِلْكَ الْأَمْثَالُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

- The word **"*jabal*" (mountain)** is being used here as **a metaphor**, in Arabic language, for "a big and proud man", or a mighty "leader of a nation".

- **One of the main reasons** for disbelievers to **reject a Prophet of God** has always been that **he seems to be an ordinary human being, and not a mighty leader of a nation**, or a towering personality whose majesty instills fear in their hearts.

The Metaphor of "Mountain":
A General Invitation to Ponder Over Figures of Speech

- In other word, Allah the Exalted has conveyed the following:
- If this Magnificent Qur'an was revealed to an extraordinarily powerful and mighty ruler, even *he* would have crumbled under its forceful message and it would have humbled him before your very eyes!

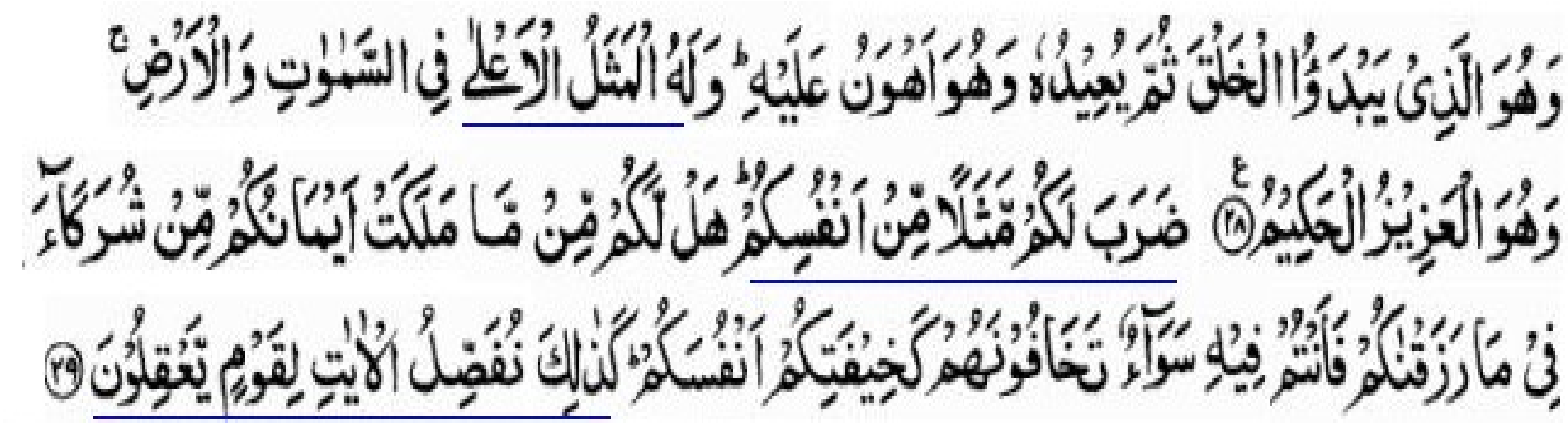
- **This is an example of the figures of speech Allah uses**, so that you may learn

  (1) **to think deeply** and

  (2) **understand the higher meaning**.

Parable of Masters and Servants

(30:28-29)


وَهُوَ الَّذِي يَبْدَؤُا الْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُ وَهُوَ أَهْوَنُ عَلَيْهِ ۚ وَلَهُ الْمَثَلُ الْأَعْلَىٰ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ
وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٢٨﴾ ضَرَبَ لَكُم مَّثَلًا مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ ۖ هَل لَّكُم مِّن مَّا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُم مِّن شُرَكَاءَ
فِي مَا رَزَقْنَاكُمْ فَأَنتُمْ فِيهِ سَوَاءٌ تَخَافُونَهُمْ كَخِيفَتِكُمْ أَنفُسَكُمْ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Parable of Masters and Servants

(30:28-29)

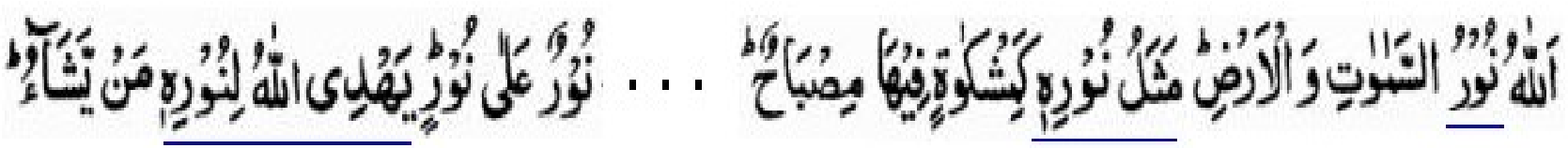
- You have servants and slaves. And you know very well that you do not treat them as your equals. You do not let them share equally in your wealth and power.

- And yet you are just human beings, *created* by God.

- So, ***why*** do you think it makes *any* sense at all that Allah the Almighty would have taken anyone beneath Him (and created by Him) to be as His equals, and share in His Divine Powers — either as idols, or as God's alleged "Son" and the Holy Spirit, etc.?

Parables of Allah the All-Knowing:

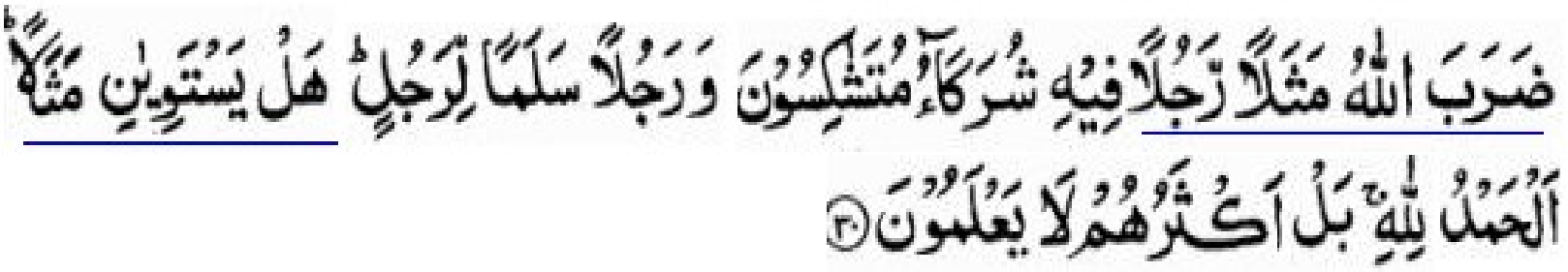
A Divine Tool of Guidance



(24:36)

(39:28)

Another Parable of Masters and Servant (39:30)

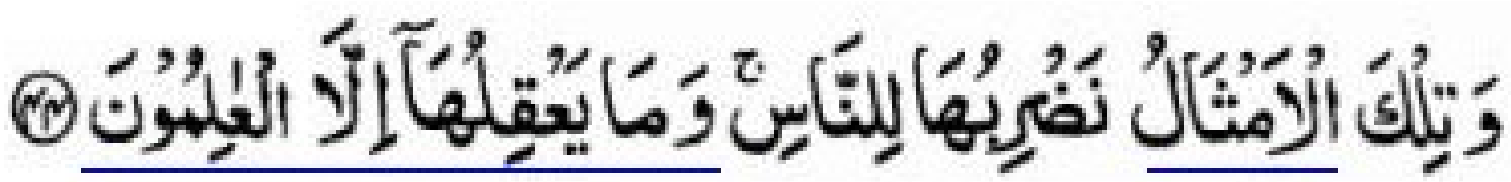


- One who has to serve several masters, who have mutually conflicting interests, is in a pitiable condition, compared to another man who has only one master to serve and please.

- This parable effectively exposes the irrationality of polytheism and proposing partners with God in any shape or form.

Improve your Knowledge-base if you want to benefit from God's metaphors

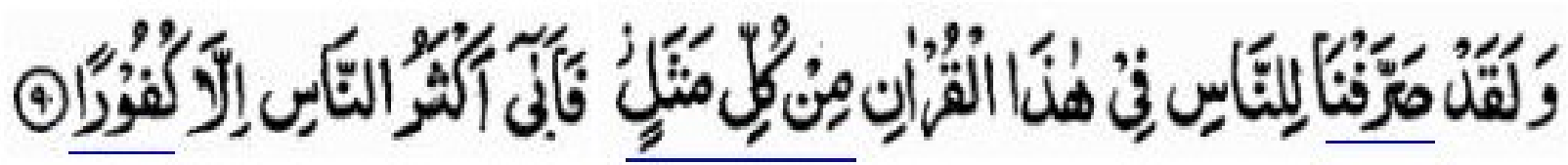
- Allah the Exalted says (29:44) that you do need to improve your knowledge, if you are to benefit from the metaphoric language and receive Divine guidance:


وَتِلْكَ الْأَمْثَالُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ ۖ وَمَا يَعْقِلُهَا إِلَّا الْعَالِمُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

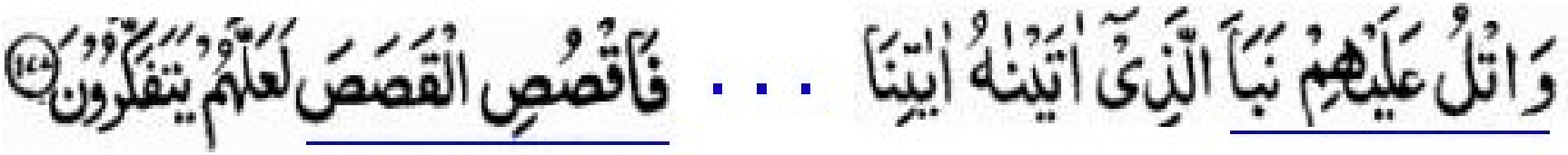
Allah Gives Exposure to All Aspects of the application of Parables and Similes

- Allah the Exalted not only sets forth parables and similitudes, as we have seen in (39:28) but also

- He **revolves** these metaphorical expressions around to give exposure to all aspects of their application in various contexts, so as to maximize the benefits


وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِي هَٰذَا الْقُرْآنِ مِن كُلِّ مَثَلٍ ۚ فَأَبَىٰ أَكْثَرُ النَّاسِ إِلَّا كُفُورًا ﴿٨٩﴾

Divine Advice for **us** to Use Parables of the Holy Qur'an in our *Tableegh* (preaching) efforts



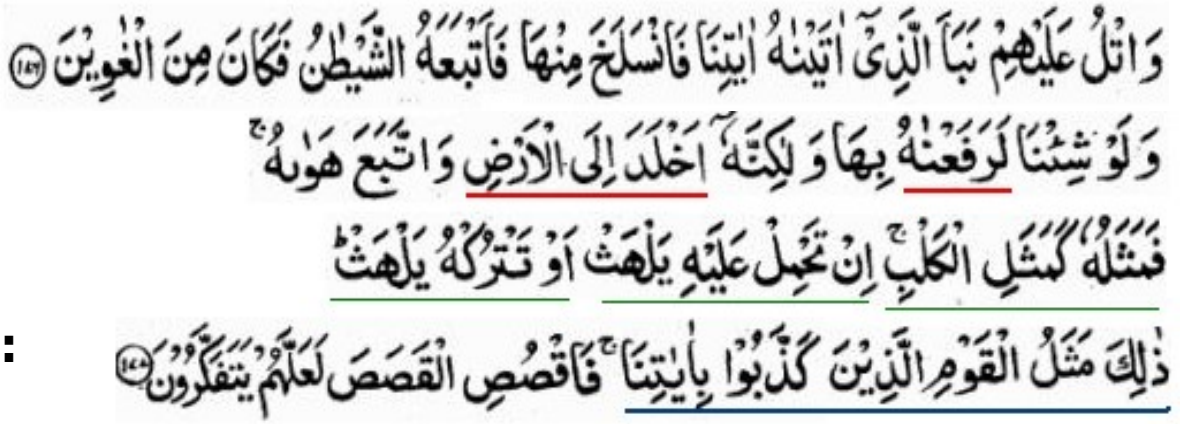
(7:177):

- And relate to them the story on one to whom We gave Our Signs … So, give *them* the description so that they may ponder.

1. The Metaphor of "**Ascending**" Explained.

2. Moral Degeneration and the **Parable of a Dog**.

(7:177):


وَاتْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَاَ الَّذِيْٓ اٰتَيْنٰهُ اٰيٰتِنَا فَانْسَلَخَ مِنْهَا فَاَتْبَعَهُ الشَّيْطٰنُ فَكَانَ مِنَ الْغٰوِيْنَ ﴿١٧٥﴾
وَلَوْ شِئْنَا لَرَفَعْنٰهُ بِهَا وَلٰكِنَّهٗٓ اَخْلَدَ اِلَى الْاَرْضِ وَاتَّبَعَ هَوٰىهُ ۚ
فَمَثَلُهٗ كَمَثَلِ الْكَلْبِ ۚ اِنْ تَحْمِلْ عَلَيْهِ يَلْهَثْ اَوْ تَتْرُكْهُ يَلْهَثْ ؕ
ذٰلِكَ مَثَلُ الْقَوْمِ الَّذِيْنَ كَذَّبُوْا بِاٰيٰتِنَا ۚ فَاقْصُصِ الْقَصَصَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُوْنَ ﴿١٧٦﴾

- And relate to them **the story** of him to whom we gave Our Signs, but he stepped away from them; so Satan followed him up, but he became *one* of those who go astray.

- And if We had pleased, We could have exalted him thereby; but he inclined to the earth and followed his evil inclination. His case, therefore, is like **the case of a *thirsty* dog**; if you drive him away, he hangs out his tongue; and if you leave him alone, he hangs out his tongue. Such is the case of the people who disbelieve in Our Signs. So, give them the description that they may ponder.

Parable of a Panting Dog — Sticking Out its Tongue

- When a person becomes totally involved in worldly matters and rejects the truth, he becomes morally degenerated and falls from the rank of a human being to the level of a dog, so to speak.

- But it must not be taken literally, because it is just a metaphor to convey a particular sense about a situation.

- A dog pants and sticks out his tongue when it is thirsty, or feeling hot, and in this way a dog tries to regulate his body temperature and cool off.

- In this verse, an underlying **metaphor of thirst** is implied, and it seems to convey the idea that the hypocrites are constantly absorbed in thoughts of worldly gain. Their thirst for money is insatiable and they suffer from this condition at all times.

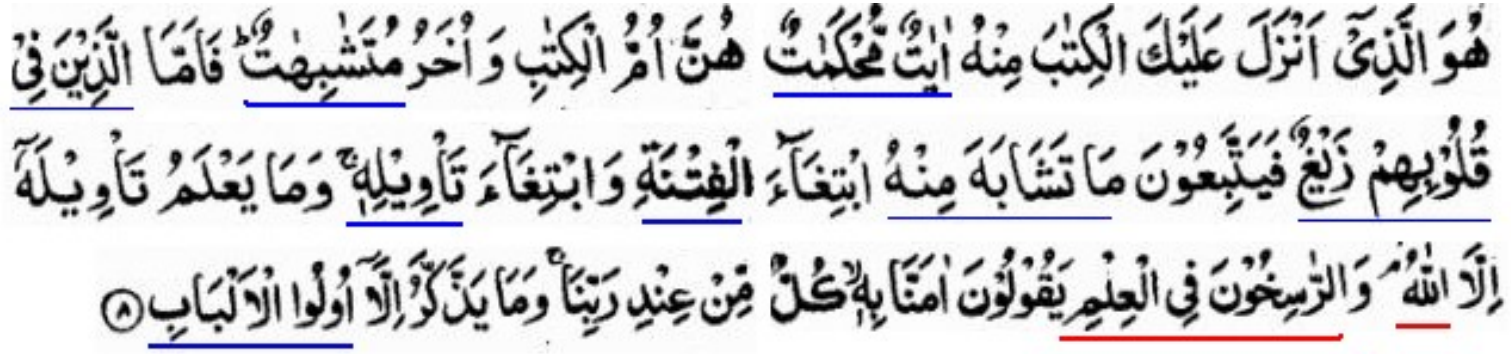
The **Grim Message** of this Parable and its **Implication** for Muslims

ذٰلِكَ مَثَلُ الْقَوْمِ الَّذِيْنَ كَذَّبُوْا بِاٰيٰتِنَا ۚ فَاقْصُصِ الْقَصَصَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُوْنَ ﴿١٧٧﴾

Those who twist the metaphors of Allah the Exalted, and insist on taking their literal meaning (that may be even contrary to the laws of Nature) they, in fact, reject the Signs of God and are unable to recognize the one who is sent by God

- **The case of Israelites**, 2000 years ago, who failed to recognize **Jesus Christ (a.s)**
- **The case of Muslims** of today, who failed to recognize the **Promised Messiah (a.s.)**

Moh'kamaat verses as the Touchstone for Understanding the ***Muta'shabihaat*** verses **(3:8)**


هُوَ الَّذِيٓ أَنزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَٰبَ مِنْهُ ءَايَٰتٌ مُّحْكَمَٰتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَٰبِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَٰبِهَٰتٌ ۖ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِى
قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَٰبَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَآءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَآءَ تَأْوِيلِهِۦ ۗ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُۥٓ
إِلَّا اللَّهُ ۘ وَالرَّٰسِخُونَ فِى الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ ءَامَنَّا بِهِۦ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِندِ رَبِّنَا ۗ وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّآ أُولُوا۟ الْأَلْبَٰبِ ﴿٧﴾

- He it is Who has sent down to you the Book; in it there are **verses that are decisive in meaning** — they are the **basis of the Book** — and there are other (**verses**) **that are susceptible of different interpretations**.
- But **those in whose heart is perversity** pursue such of these that are susceptible of different interpretations — **seeking discord and seeking *wrong* interpretation of it**. And none knows its *right* interpretation except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge; they say, 'We believe in it; the whole is from our Lord.'— And none heed except **those gifted with understanding**.

Moh'kamaat verses as the Touchstone for Understanding the ***Muta'shabihaat*** verses **(3:8)**

- ***Muh'kamaat*** verses: these do not have any use of figurative language (metaphors, similes, and parables etc.) in them
- ***Muta'shabihaat*** verses: these contain metaphors, similes, and parables etc., in them
- **The unscrupulous people** (who want to mislead others) become obsessed with the verses with figurative language and declare that those represent the literal facts.
- **Their real motivation** for doing so? "They seek to turn people away from the reality" of that teaching.

The **Parable** of a Donkey Loaded with Books

مَثَلُ الَّذِيْنَ حُمِّلُوا التَّوْرٰىةَ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَحْمِلُوْهَا كَمَثَلِ الْحِمَارِ يَحْمِلُ اَسْفَارًا ؕ
بِئْسَ مَثَلُ الْقَوْمِ الَّذِيْنَ كَذَّبُوْا بِاٰيٰتِ اللّٰهِ ؕ وَاللّٰهُ لَا يَهْدِى الْقَوْمَ الظّٰلِمِيْنَ ۝٥

(62:5)

- The likeness of those who were entrusted with **the law of Torah**, but did not carry out its commandments, is as the likeness of a donkey carrying a load of books. **Evil is the likeness of the people who reject the Signs of Allah.** And Allah guides not the wrongdoing people.

  - ✓ A “donkey carrying a load of books” is **quite unaware of *what* is written in those books**; let alone how to *act* on what is written in them.

  - ✓ A “donkey carrying a load of books” just **considers it a “burden”** and is evidently **not quite happy carrying it**, but is **quite contented when it is *relieved* of that burden**.

The **Parable** of a Donkey Loaded with Books

- The **purpose** of being granted a divine Book is to:
  - **(1)** act on its teachings, and
  - **(2)** embrace all the Signs mentioned in it when they arise, e.g. the acceptance of the Jesus Christ as the Messiah, who was sent by God to reform **the adherents of Torah**.

- The verse contains **an implied warning to the Muslims:**

- **Do not to reject the Promised Messiah (a.s.)** when he appears as prophesied.

- Prophecies of his advent are stated in the Holy Qur'an and numerous books of Ahadith and their voluminous commentaries — a "load of books" (that you have been complacently carrying, all these centuries).

- Carrying this "load of books" — without pondering over their contents, and without carrying out their commandments and instructions to accept the divinely commissioned Messiah and Imam Mahdi who came with the Divine Signs mentioned the same "load of books" — **does not absolve you of your responsibility** (to accept him) that was placed on you by these books.

A *Hadith* also Forewarned the Muslims …

- It is related by Hadrat Abdullah bin Omar (r.a.) that the Holy Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w) said:

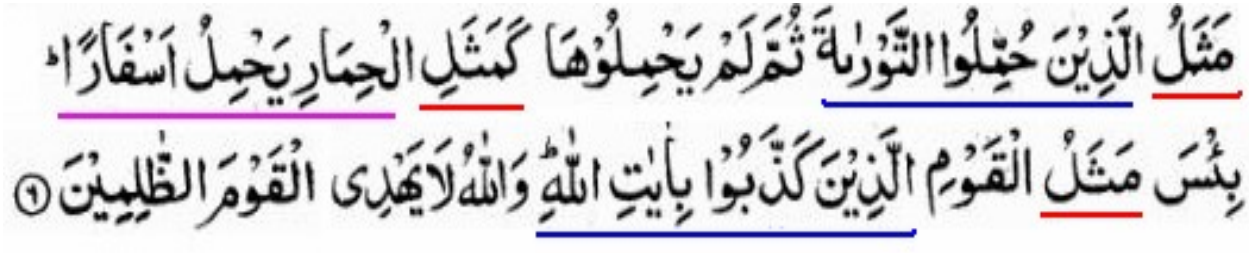
عَنْ عَبْدِ اللّٰهِ بْنِ عَمْرٍو رَضِيَ اللّٰهُ عَنْهُمَا قَالَ: قَالَ رَسُوْلُ اللّٰهِ صَلَّى اللّٰهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ:
لَيَأْتِيَنَّ عَلٰى اُمَّتِيْ مَا اَتٰى عَلٰى بَنِيْ اِسْرَآئِيْلَ حَذْوَ النَّعْلِ بِالنَّعْلِ . . .

(ترمذی کتاب الایمان باب افتراق ھذہ الامۃ ص۹۱ جامع الصغیر ص۲ مصری ابن ماجہ کتاب الفتن باب افتراق الامم ص۲۱۶)

- **My followers**, too, will be visited by the same set of circumstances that befell the **Children of Israel**; they will mutually resemble **as the shoe of one foot resembles the shoe of the other foot** …(Source: *Tirmidhi, Kitaab-ul-Iman, baab: Iftiraaq haazi'hil Ummah; and Ibn-e-Majah, Kitaab-ul-Fit'n, baab: Iftiraaq-ul-Umamm*)

- The **simile of a pair of shoes**, in this Hadith, is very insightful. The shoe that belongs to the left foot is *not* exactly identical in shape to the shoe that belongs to the right foot. But, by looking at either one of them you can recognize that it belongs to *the same pair!*

Learning Important Lessons from the **Figurative Expressions** used in the Holy Qur'an


مَثَلُ الَّذِيْنَ حُمِّلُوا التَّوْرٰىةَ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَحْمِلُوْهَا كَمَثَلِ الْحِمَارِ يَحْمِلُ اَسْفَارًا ؕ
بِئْسَ مَثَلُ الْقَوْمِ الَّذِيْنَ كَذَّبُوْا بِاٰيٰتِ اللّٰهِ ؕ وَاللّٰهُ لَا يَهْدِى الْقَوْمَ الظّٰلِمِيْنَ ۝

- The last portion of this verse, "Evil is the likeness of the people who reject the Signs of Allah." had **a futuristic dimension** to it, and

- The divine **purpose** and **wisdom** behind using this figurative language was **to forewarn the Muslims of today** to:

➢ **Learn from the mistakes of their Jewish predecessors, and**

➢ **Avoid the pitfall of not recognizing the Messiah and Imam Mahdi,** due to their insistence on taking **literal** meaning of the Holy Qur'an's **metaphors**, when he would come with manifest Signs from Allah.